

POSITIVE DISSENT

LOOKING TO BOOST INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION?
ENCOURAGE YOUR EMPLOYEES TO DISAGREE MORE OFTEN.

By Melissa Campeau

In August 2014, electric carmaker Tesla recruited 30 hackers, full time. Why? They wanted subject-matter experts to poke holes in their network security, so they could repair and improve an already industry-leading product.

Along the same lines, medical researcher Alice Stewart – who made the link in the 1950s between the then-routine practice of X-raying pregnant women and childhood cancers – regularly worked in tandem with a statistician named George Neil. Neil's sole job was to attempt to *disprove* Stewart's theories. When he couldn't, she knew she was on to something.

This practice of actively seeking and considering opposing points of view is not only an important tool for decision-making, it's critical for innovation. In

practical terms, if an organization is trying to disrupt the market with its goods or services, that innovative offering can only evolve out of a culture that's enthusiastic about new points of view, invites a little conflict and welcomes against-the-grain ideas.

WHAT'S POSITIVE ABOUT DISSENT?

In organizational culture, you might call this positive dissent. It's something executive coach and HR consultant Bonnie Flatt characterizes as "the ability to disagree in a positive way while maintaining connection, trust and respect for others' points of view."

It's not about inviting chaos among the ranks. A smooth-running business will,

of course, require some amount of order. But that shouldn't come at the expense of employees' curiosity and willingness to speak up when they want to or need to.

There's a diverse collection of opinions on offer in nearly every organization, whether it's related to cultural background, life experience, age or gender. An organization that doesn't tap into that – by seeking and encouraging points of view that might be at odds with leadership or the status quo – is missing out.

"Positive dissent falls under the simple premise that two heads are better than one, four better than two and so on," said Anthony Papa, senior vice president global human resources at Federal-Mogul Motorparts.



**EMPLOYEES, AFTER ALL, PAY
MUCH MORE ATTENTION TO
CULTURE THAN TO POLICY.**

Ideas from different sources are like extra pieces of a puzzle. A greater number of them can help create a clearer big picture.

“A leader presented with more diverse and even dissenting perspectives can make a more informed decision. If you don’t know what you don’t know, you may miss something,” said Flatt. Contrarian ideas might just help a leader locate a blind spot, or two.

For employees, there’s a direct link between the freedom and safety to express dissenting ideas and their connectedness to work and the organization.

“When employees are able to speak openly and share differing opinions, it contributes to their sense of purpose and the contributions they feel they can offer the organization,” said Papa. “Positive dissent is analogous to empowerment and engagement.”

ROOM FOR GROWTH

Plenty of organizations may believe they encourage positive dissent. The numbers, however, paint a different picture.

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In her 2012 TedTalk, "Dare to Disagree," business leader Margaret Heffernan points out that within American corporations, 85 per cent of executives acknowledge that they've refrained from raising issues or concerns at work because they didn't want to cause conflict.

In the best-selling business management book *Tribal Leadership*, authors Dave Logan, John King and Halee Fischer-Wright share research indicating 49 per cent of North American workplaces are operating from a stage in development that doesn't support a diversity of opinions.

"In this stage, knowledge is hoarded – it's power," said Flatt. "The language is, 'I'm great and you're not.'" With this mindset, people aren't open to receiving new or contradictory ideas and don't feel safe engaging in productive disagreements. It's a structure that discourages true collaboration.

When the ability to voice differing opinions is missing within an organization, it's a recipe for stagnation, or worse.

"If positive dissent is absent, I really cannot see organizations being very healthy," said Papa. Most organizational models for

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– ANTHONY PAPA, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT GLOBAL HUMAN RESOURCES, FEDERAL-MOGUL MOTORPARTS

success advocate hiring top talent to drive the organization. "This top talent wants to be recognized, have input into decision-making and long-term strategic planning. However, an absence of positive two-way,

open communication and a culture that doesn't encourage employees to challenge one another will result in top talent, or your 'A-players,' leaving and more mediocre talent, or your 'B-players,' staying."

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The next level in cultural progression, as *Tribal Leadership* describes it, shifts the thinking from “I’m great” to “we’re great.” For the 22 per cent of North American workplaces operating from this level, there’s a much more significant likelihood of active listening and healthy conflict.

“This level calls for the company to know what its purpose is, so they’re not just here to make x amount of money or sell this many widgets,” said Flatt.

Tech giant Google, for example, tells its employees the company’s reason for being is to provide information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That statement offers a shared sense of purpose that can give direction and meaning to healthy disagreements, and help steer resolutions.

“When people are operating from that collective ‘we’ place, you actually have dialogue. It’s not conflict for the sake of it, but for the sake of improving,” said Flatt.

COMMON ROADBLOCKS

Despite all the upsides, creating a culture of positive dissent is unlikely to be free of any, well, conflict.

Asking some leaders to invite more dissent among the team might seem to them like handing over the steering wheel. And collecting opposing ideas might seem, on the surface, like a sure-fire way to slow productivity.

What’s more, many of us are trained to find, exclusively, the data that supports our particular view. It’s how most essays are written during academic years, how you gain support and funding for new projects in the working world. It’s effective – but only up to a point.

To expand your own point of view by incorporating others’ ideas requires checking your ego and your agenda at the door.

“It means accepting that you have just one point of view, releasing the need to be the expert and taking on a beginner mindset,” said Flatt. “That takes courage and it takes vulnerability.”

For leaders who fear occasional conflict will erode team dynamics, the opposite is much more likely to be true. Heffernan points to research showing a direct correlation between the strength of interpersonal relationships and the amount of healthy conflict within those groups. The key word is healthy – those disagreements have to be aired in an environment where people feel heard, respected and valued.

“If people don’t agree with your idea, you’re much more likely to be accepting of that if you feel you’ve at least been heard,” said Flatt.

The idea of willingly engaging in disagreements is also counterintuitive for many people, who may fear conflict and tend to avoid it. This may stem from an upbringing in a particular household or culture with strong feelings about challenging authority, or it may relate to an entire generation’s collective experience with conflict.

“My sense gained over 25 years in the HR field is that newer generations – Gen X and Gen Y – both want and need positive dissent,” said Papa. “Boomers have traditionally been more tolerant of top-down management approaches.”

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PLENTY OF ORGANIZATIONS MAY BELIEVE THEY ENCOURAGE POSITIVE DISSENT. THE NUMBERS, HOWEVER, PAINT A DIFFERENT PICTURE.

COAX SOME CONFLICT

Knowing how to engage in a disagreement – but keep it positive and productive – is a learned skill. For many employees, that development might come from coaching and training. A good deal of it, though, might come from watching how leaders interact with the team.

“Organizations have to lead that kind of cultural shift from the top,” said Flatt. “If HR truly wants to have a culture where there’s openness, debate and constructive feedback, they need to build not just tools and processes, but a way of being.”

Flatt points to SNC Lavalin’s situation back in 2013. The Canadian

engineering firm made headlines that year when it was charged with multiple counts of bribery, a practice that was either widely known, or widely suspected within the organization.

“They had all these policies in place for whistleblowing,” said Flatt. “All of these ways for people to share difficult information, and nobody shared. Even though HR had put together some really good processes, the culture didn’t allow for that freedom.” Employees, after all, pay much more attention to culture than to policy. “HR needs to educate and coach the leadership team, and then that understanding and that behaviour has to cascade down.”

When HR spots a problem, says Flatt, it’s time to get curious.

“If you’re seeing a lot of groupthink, do a diagnostic and get to the root cause. What’s getting in the way? What needs to change?” she said. “Those questions will shed more light than bringing in yet another new tool or process to address the issue.”

Understand progress and help steer change by setting a benchmark, then taking the organization’s temperature regularly.

“Measuring employee opinion on the subject and adjusting strategies to include empowerment and engagement will be critical,” said Papa.



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TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

If a little dissent is a good thing, what's too much? To some degree, that's for each organization to determine, based on what suits the corporate culture, says Papa.

"Companies typically issue levels of authority matrices, and these can be used to specify just how far down the matrix a leader should go to gather ideas and opinions," he said.

Inviting an organization of 5,000 employees to all offer input on a new product, for example, and then sifting through all of their responses, isn't likely to be cost or time-effective.

"Setting up a structure with limits and expectations would avoid an organization losing valuable time through a 'consensus management approach,'" he said.

On a more micro level, someone who voices contrary opinions in a particularly aggressive way is likely to cause discord within a group. The remedy might involve a conversation with a manager or coach who acknowledges the employee's passion, but then points out how it's perceived by others.

"You might say, 'I'm noticing you're really passionate about this thing, but how it appears to me is that you're very firm and not willing to look deeper,'" said Flatt. "Then ask the employee what's going on." Where a manager sees someone antagonistic and combative, an employee may see himself as passionate and committed. "They may have no way of knowing their behaviour is causing other people to shut down. If you don't address it, you end up with a pattern of misunderstanding."

GIVE THE STATUS QUO A NUDGE

As Heffernan points out in her TedTalk, most major catastrophes aren't caused by secret information. Instead, the signs are in open information that people are unwilling to discuss. The same could be said about innovations. New ideas are there, just waiting for someone to raise questions, nudge the status quo and shake things up a little. What employees need is the freedom to be that positive disruption.

By creating a culture that encourages people to speak their minds and to challenge respectfully, an organization allows everyone to contribute at their highest level – an essential ingredient for a genuinely inclusive, collaborative and innovative workplace. ■